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S. P. E. Tract No. XXXVII

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*S. P. E.*

*TRACT No. XXXVII*

‘OXFORD’ ENGLISH

By

R. W. CHAPMAN



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## ‘OXFORD’ ENGLISH

IN February 1931 Dr. Frank Vizetelly, who is well known in America as a lexicographer, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* an attack<sup>1</sup> on what is usually called ‘standard English’, as a debased, effete, and inaudible form of speech. Dr. Vizetelly described this English as ‘the Oxford voice’. His article provoked me to a reply, published in the New York *Saturday Review of Literature*,<sup>2</sup> in which I pleaded that standard English has had more abuse than it deserves, and moreover that it cannot properly be called Oxonian. This was not the first time that I had been tempted to a protest; but I had prudently abstained, conscious of an inadequate equipment. I have the most elementary acquaintance with the science of phonetics, and am wholly ignorant of music; and am therefore incompetent to answer fully certain questions about pronunciation which I have often put to myself. At last, however, I broke silence to defend the English of my kind, and to exculpate my University from a false ascription. I knew I must abide the consequences of my rashness;<sup>3</sup> but I was far from guessing that the most serious would be an invitation from the Society for Pure English to develop my position in a tract. The invitation was gratifying, since it confirmed my impression that there is more to be said about standard English than is found in the books. But it was embarrassing, because I must be in danger of exposing myself. What follows is submitted with diffidence to the judgement of experts, and without more than a hope that it may provoke inquiries which I cannot pursue to any certain conclusion.

Dr. Vizetelly’s position may readily be made clear by quotation.

‘The best people of England to-day talk with the cockney voice that, leaving the purlieu of Limehouse, has reached the purlieu of Mayfair. This is the aftermath of the war, during which the spirit of democracy prevailed, and the pronunciation

<sup>1</sup> *A Matter of Pronunciation.*

<sup>2</sup> 23 May 1931: *English Pronunciation.*

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Vizetelly published a rejoinder in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, but I do not think this advanced the discussion.

of the common people left its impress indelibly on the so-called best people, with a few languid drawls, terminal *aws*, clipped *g*'s, and feeble *h*'s thrown in for good measure, which, later, acquired the name of the Oxford voice. . . . Mispronunciation abroad is due largely to the influence exerted by the people of Oxford, who have steadily debased the coinage of English speech with emasculated voices and exaggerated idiosyncrasies. They cannot ask you to dinner; they ask you to "dinnah". They do not come to a lecture; they come to a "lectchah". They believe in "cultchah", and instead of saying, "Oh no", they say, "Oo noo", or "Aw naw", or even "Ow now".

This will hardly be received as a scientific account either of aristocratic English or of Oxford English. The chronology is manifestly wrong; pronunciation does not change as fast as that, and in fact English pronunciation has suffered no very important change since the war. The description of Oxford English is of course a travesty.<sup>1</sup> None the less, Dr. Vizetelly's indictment expresses views which are widely held and which it is foolish to neglect. It is too confidently assumed that the position of standard English is secure. Those who speak it, and would wish to promote its currency, have been active in criticizing its faults and have made some attempt to improve it; they have hardly troubled to assert its merits. Perhaps a defence of standard English is needed.

But it will be convenient to deal first with the minor issue of Oxford.<sup>2</sup> What, if anything, is the Oxford accent? There are two things which it might plausibly be thought to be. It might be an academic speech of exaggerated precision, expressive of intellectual superiority, and not unlike what has been called 'curate's English', a speech aiming at audibility and at edification, and betraying conscious rectitude. It might, again, be a class-conscious speech, which would not aim at audibility but would express a sense of social superiority. This is clearly intended by a phrase with which I am familiar, 'the English of Eton and Christ Church'. If 'Oxford English' means either of these things—and I think it is used to mean both—it can be shown to be an inaccurate label. There is

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Vizetelly says that 'the English themselves' call it 'the abominable Oxford voice'. This expression may be current in America, but it is not British English. We say 'Oxford accent'.

<sup>2</sup> The expression has, I think, been current any time this century; I have not found any earlier history.



really nothing which can with propriety be called Oxford English.

The credit or discredit of 'Oxford English' belongs, of course, to the University, not to the natives of the city, who are not linguistically remarkable. The University consists of the undergraduates, who spend three or four years there, and of the dons. The young men and women are drawn from all parts of the island and from remoter places, and from many strata of society. The great majority of them, no doubt, speak what would be called standard English; but whatever they speak, their pronunciation is formed before arrival, and few of them can be supposed to alter their speech substantially while they are in residence.<sup>1</sup> If they should do so by emulation of their preceptors, the result would not be uniformity. For the dons are a highly individual and heterogeneous body, whose speech may have in common a certain donnish quality, but is more remarkable for its diversity. Many dons are Scotsmen, speaking good educated Scots. Others are North-country Englishmen, whose speech has salient differences from standard English. All are likely to be less imitative, more independent, in their speech as in their other mannerisms, than the average man.

It is, I think, clear that Oxford English is not and could not be, by origin or by definition, what Dr. Vizetelly and others have imagined. There may be a recognizable quality, common to the speech of many University men, which might fairly be called academic. Such a description would not be a proper description of their speech as a whole, but of one aspect of it only; nor could it be applicable to a single University. That the expression 'Oxford English' is wholly without meaning, I will not so confidently maintain. Some of my friends, to whose judgement I defer, think that perhaps there is something in it. People have claimed that they could detect an Oxford man in Singapore by his speech alone. This I take leave to doubt. Men's antecedents may be guessed from other characters than their pronunciation; and I do not believe that Eton and Christ Church can be distinguished, by this test, from Harrow and Trinity. One acute judge has formed the impression that the speech of Cambridge, as a whole, differs recognizably from that

<sup>1</sup> The Scots and Americans are more likely than the English to be aware of differences, and some of them undergo some modification in speech.

of Oxford. It seems possible that differences of ethos, influenced by the predominant studies of the two Universities, may produce, upon average, a difference in speech which can be detected. But these are, at the most, fine shades, and have no relevance to the main issue.

## II

The position and prospects of standard English are obscure. The questions which suggest themselves—what is it? who speak it? what are its claims? what its chances of survival?—have not received equal attention. Standard English has been closely studied, and roundly abused; I doubt if it has been adequately appraised.

Henry Sweet<sup>1</sup> defined standard English as 'originally that mixture of the Midland and Southern dialects which was spoken in London during the Middle Ages', but as now 'a class-dialect more than a local dialect: it is the language of the educated all over Great Britain'. This is wider than is convenient, since the speech of the educated Northerner or Welshman still, though decreasingly, differs from educated Southern English, and the differences are important for any discussion of all English. I use 'standard English' in the narrower sense given to the term by Messrs. Larsen and Walker in their book on American pronunciation.<sup>2</sup> These authors, indeed, define the 'Received Pronunciation' as that of 'the great public schools, the Universities, and the learned professions', without local restriction. But they distinguish it from 'Northern English', and regard this distinction as parallel to their distinction between the speech of New England and 'General American'.

It may be well to mention some of the salient differences which are found in the educated English of this island; and it will be convenient to contrast Southern standard English with educated Scots, because that is the most important of the British dialects next to Southern standard English itself, and has been familiar to me from childhood.

1. *păst* and *pāst*, &c. Most educated Scots use a vowel which is very similar to the long vowel of standard English,

<sup>1</sup> *The Sounds of English*, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Pronunciation, a practical guide to American standards*, by T. Larsen (M.A. Toronto, B.A. Oxon.) and F. C. Walker (Ph.D. Harvard) 1930.

if not identical with it. But in the North of England, as in General American,<sup>1</sup> the short vowel predominates.

2. *prɒd*, &c. The highly characteristic short *o* of standard English has I think almost established itself throughout the island; but a different vowel is sometimes heard in educated Scots. A very different vowel is familiar to us all in American *prăduct*.

3. *what*, &c. *wat* is peculiar to standard English, all other dialects retaining *hwat*.

4. *r*, the storm-centre of all these discussions. ‘*r* in English occurs only before a vowel following it without a pause’, and ‘in some pronunciations is always dropped at the end of a word whether a vowel follows or not’;<sup>2</sup> that is, the ‘voice-glide’ (the symbol for which is ə, an inverted *e*) which has replaced *r* in *here* is sometimes retained even in *here it is* (hiə it iz). Sweet thought this ‘an artificial reaction against the insertion of final hiatus-filling *r* after ə in such groups as *India Office*’. It is noteworthy that Scots, which is never guilty of *Indiaroffice*, always retains *r* before a following vowel.

‘It is a defect’, writes Sweet,<sup>3</sup> ‘to trill *r*’, though he adds that it is sometimes done in recitation or in declamation. There is some conflict of evidence here; for Prof. H. Kurath,<sup>4</sup> discussing the word *America*, calls attention to ‘the articulation of the *r*, for which the Westerner curls back the tip of the tongue, whereas the Englishman usually trills it’. I infer, without risking a phonetic judgement of my own, that the difference is only of degree; and though on the whole I think English has gained by the disappearance of trilled *r*, yet I am glad to believe that an Englishman may without difficulty or affectation trill an *r* when to do so gains audibility or sonority, as when a clergyman breaks silence with

Rend your hearts and not your garments

or a schoolboy declaims

Ruin seize thee, ruthless king.

But this is to anticipate.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The long vowel is heard only in New England.

<sup>2</sup> Sweet *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *S.P.E.* XXX, p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> I find that Prof. Daniel Jones distinguishes a rolled *r* from a semi-rolled *r*, ‘i.e. rolled, but with only a single tap of the tongue’. *Phonetic Transcriptions*, p. vii.

Except before a vowel, *r* in standard English has disappeared, but has profoundly affected the preceding vowels, both by altering their quality (making *her*, *bird*, *turn* identical) and by adding the voice-glide as in *hear* and *fire* (hiə, faɪə). Scots, whether influenced by standard English or following a parallel development, has lost a great deal of its *r*. Many educated Scots are content to pronounce *farther* and *father* very nearly as homophones, and to suppress the final *r* unless a vowel follows. But good Scots still has much more *r* than standard English.

Finally, the voice-glide which has replaced *r* in standard English has itself a precarious tenure in many words, and its disappearance threatens to produce a great many regrettable homophones; for *more* (mawə) and *pour* (pawə) and even *poor* (puə) become identical with *maw* and *parw*. Scots has not, I think, yet followed this *modən patən*, which few will defend.

5. Obscured vowels. The vowel associated with the suppression of *r* is by no means the only vowel which is weak and ambiguous. The strong stress of standard English concurs with human frailty to reduce most unaccented vowels to a careless slur; we are bound to believe the phoneticians when they assure us that in rapid speech we say something very like *oblaquy* and *parasite* and *orotə* (orator). Except in so far as it is protected by the retention (even if only vestigial) of *r*,<sup>1</sup> I am not sure that Scots is very much more accurate; but on the whole it is certain that standard English has gone farther on this road to ruin than the chief rival dialects. American, helped by its weaker stress (and especially by its secondary stresses, as *necessāry*, *obligatōry*), is much less exposed to this kind of disintegration.

### III

This sketch, however imperfect, of the divergences of standard English from other forms of the language is amply sufficient to explain mutual recrimination, and to indicate the obstacles which beset any attempt at uniformity. I have no wish to advocate uniformity. But there are powerful forces working for uniformity, and if speech is

<sup>1</sup> For example, a Scot who retains any vestige of *r* in *part* is in no danger of pronouncing *partition* as *petition*. But in standard English *Partition of Poland* and *Petition of Right* may be perilously close.

to be taught, by precept or example, the speech taught in this island must, in the main, approximate to standard English. Neither schoolmasters nor wireless announcers can be directed to use a pronunciation which is definitely alien to themselves, or to the bulk of their audiences; and it is impracticable to insist that only Scotsmen be employed in this delicate task.

Of the charges levelled against standard English by Dr. Vizetelly and his like—that it was born in Limehouse, Mayfair, or Oxford; that it is inaudible, emasculated, exaggerated, stilted, and chaotic—only one is gravely embarrassing to its defenders. The charge of careless articulation is serious indeed. Those who read the tract<sup>1</sup> in which Robert Bridges exposed our slovenly tricks, and attacked those phoneticians who, as he believed, are not content to record them but are doing their best to establish and propagate them, will hardly need to be reminded of that vivid picture of the perils which threaten us. Accepting as accurate the record of standard English pronunciation given in *A Phonetic Dictionary of the English Language*<sup>2</sup> by Hermann Michaelis and Daniel Jones, and in Prof. Jones's *Phonetic Transcriptions of English Prose*,<sup>3</sup> Bridges had no difficulty in revealing a mass of vowel-degradation and an alarming accumulation, as its result, of homophones. Prof. Jones's notation showed him that in ordinary speech all the unaccented vowels in the following words had been worn down either to short *i* or to the indeterminate ə: *temperature* (temprɪtshə), *interest*, *senator*, *natural*, *orator*, *obloquy*, *equivocal*, *solution*, *sublime*; and that *four*, *fore*, and *for*, *pour*, *pore*, and *poor*, *shore* and *sure*, were all the same—*faw*, *parw*, *shaw*.

This was very bad; and if it was not quite so bad as it looked, it was (and is) bad enough to call for protest and if possible for action. If standard English had degenerated so far, must it not either resign, to purer dialects, such supremacy as it possessed, or carry the whole language with it to the abyss?

But there were qualifications. In the first place, Prof. Jones had recognized<sup>4</sup> three styles of pronunciation: one for

<sup>1</sup> *S. P. E.* Tract II, *On English Homophones*, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> 1913 and 1917. Bridges called attention, as we shall see, to significant discrepancies between the two editions.

<sup>3</sup> 1907.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Phonetic Transcriptions*. His dictionary follows the middle style.

public delivery, one for reading aloud in private, one for rapid conversation. Of his most alarming disclosures, some applied only to the second and third styles, some only to the third. Further, Bridges was able to show that Prof. Jones had made even careless speech rather worse, and rather more uniform, than the facts warranted. There was in this nothing to surprise. A trained phonetician, aware that the facts of speech are very different from what the speakers suppose them to be, cannot but take a certain pleasure in confronting them with the ascertained truth; he is naturally impatient of the common delusion that we speak (*exceptis excipiendis*) much as we spell. In his zeal for the truth, he is prone to overstate it. There is also a practical consideration. The gradations of speech are infinite; but a notation must be found which is readily understood, and there is a strong temptation to represent as identical sounds which are nearly, but not quite, identical. Bridges was, I think, successful in convicting Prof. Jones of some exaggeration and some over-simplification. He convicted him out of his own mouth. In the first edition of the dictionary *four*, *fore*, and *for* were all *faw*, and *year* was *yer*; but in the second edition *fawə* was admitted as an alternative (for *four* and *fore*) and *yer* disappeared in favour of *yeeə*. These amendments did honour to Prof. Jones's love of truth, but were damaging evidence of his former willingness to believe the worst. On the second count, Prof. Jones admitted that his ə was only an approximation. He had explained it in 1907 as being the second vowel of *over*, in 1913 as being the first vowel of *about*; but in 1917 he wrote 'ə varies noticeably according to its position in the word and in the sentence'. In the unaccented vowels of *china* and *cathedral* 'three different values of ə may be heard'.

Now it is one thing to retain a traditional symbol, though it may have slightly different meanings; it is another to introduce a new, and a strictly defined, symbol (which must be defined, for without definition it means nothing) and then to explain that it 'varies noticeably'. As Bridges wrote, 'the value of ə when Mr. Jones first substituted it for a disguised unaccented vowel, was that the speaker might know what sound he had to produce'. The second vowel of *obloquy*, Mr. Jones had told us, is not—whatever we may think—*ö*; it is ə, the *er* of *over*. The second vowel of *parasite* is not, whatever we may think, *ä*; it is ə—

*er* as in *erbout*. Very well; we would try to face the facts. But when we had faced them, we were warned to make allowances for 'noticeable variation'. What variation?

There are other sources of consolation. Language is saved from unintelligibility by the practical necessity of being understood; public speakers, schoolmasters, shopkeepers and their customers, business men in noisy offices, will always rouse themselves to distinctness when they find they are not being heard. On all sorts of emergent occasions vowels recover their full value; and pronunciations which would be pedantic in familiar talk are received, on such occasions, as natural and correct. 'Did you say *dee-scent* or *dis-sent*?' does not sound a strange or foolish question. The first vowels of *ascend* and *descend*, in ordinary talk, are respectively *ǎ* (or *ə*) and *ĩ*; yet printers can, without awkwardness, maintain an important technical distinction by always so articulating *ǎsēnders* and *deesēnders* as to avoid ambiguity. Song, which will always be popular, and which exacts articulation, is a sovereign preservative; and though *particular* may usually be *pāticyculə*, or *pāticycələ*, or even *pāticycələ*, we accept with understanding and positive enjoyment its full utterance in Gilbert's

Did nothing in par-tic-ul-ar  
And did it very well.

These facts show that Bridges was right in his conclusion, that 'unaccented short vowels that are hurried over between the accents in talking are disguised and lose quality, but in good speakers a trace of the original quality will remain' and may readily be raised to prominence. Our vowels

may be eclipsed, but are extinguished not.

A valuable protection, not I think noticed by Bridges, is furnished by that very variability of stress which has produced so much variation in our vowels. The obscured vowels, in a great many words, are protected by the corresponding vowels which, in cognate words, carry the stress. Thus *modern* is saved by *modérnity*, *orator* by *oratórical*, *sublime* by *súblimate*, *symbol* by *sympbólic*, *calumny* by *calúmniate*, *salute* by *salutátion*, *parsonage* by *parsórical*, *content* by *cóntent*, *lament* by *lámentable*, *similar* by *similárity*, *tendency* by *tendéncious*, *catastrophic* by *catástrophe*, *harmony* by *harmónious*. I pile up examples,

because I do not think the value of these safeguards has been appreciated. Similarly, latent *r* comes to life before a vowel, and so *bore* and *ignore* are saved, in some degree, by *boring* and *ignorance*; for *bawing* and *ignæans*, though I am afraid I have heard them, are not likely to prevail; *hoar* is saved by *hoary* (*hawy* is impossible?), *lore* by *folk-lorist*, *floo* by *flooring*, *tore* by 'he tore it'.

Finally, the influence of other dialects will be important. Southern standard English may conceivably, in the course of time, assimilate the rest of this island, though Scotland will not be absorbed quickly or without a struggle. There is no possibility that the United States or the Dominions will accommodate themselves to the speech of London. It is far more likely that any universal English of the remote future will have North American English as its dominant ancestor. In the nearer future there will perhaps be some give-and-take between the intelligentsia at home and overseas; we are increasingly conscious of our differences, and less intolerant of them than formerly. In any case, the other forms of speech, made familiar by visitors, by wireless, by the talkies, will stand as a reminder, and may serve as a corrective.

On examination, then, the situation seems less desperate than at first appeared. But it should not be allowed to drift. I could never understand Mr. H. W. Fowler's contention<sup>1</sup> that in pronunciation 'the only right ambition is to do as our neighbours', and that for most purposes 'our neighbour is the average Englishman'. He would allow the learned to pronounce learned words as they please; but 'we deserve not praise but censure if we decline to accept the popular pronunciation of popular words'. Why should Mr. Fowler, who has devoted his life to the improvement, at least to the preservation, of grammar and diction, be content in pronunciation to follow the herd? The doctrine is anarchical, and I believe fallacious. It is true that when a pronunciation is definitely and unambiguously established, it is very difficult to introduce a new or restore an old pronunciation; and the attempt should hardly be made unless there is a clear gain in prospect. Standard English cannot recall the trilled *r* to please Dr. Vizetelly. But our pronunciation is in a very fluid state,<sup>2</sup> and few

<sup>1</sup> *Modern English Usage*, s.v. *pronunciation*.

<sup>2</sup> 'No two persons speak alike.' Jones, *Phonetic Transcriptions*, p. 42. And no one person uses a uniform pronunciation on all occasions.



people know much about their own speech. People are, however, curious about pronunciation, and not unwilling to learn. Mr. Fowler, I suggest, has missed a great opportunity. If, instead of declaring it pedantic to say anything but *pictsher*, he had made a stand for *picture* (which many people still say in their more deliberate moods, and many more believe that they say always), he would have had an eager following. In phonetics England does not yet groan under a democratic tyranny; we are free, within wide limits, to speak as well as we can.

#### IV

It was a cardinal point in Bridges's position that corrupt pronunciation is not only being ascertained and codified by phoneticians, but is being actively promoted by them. Prof. Jones, as we have seen, distinguished in his *Phonetic Transcriptions* three styles of speech, which we may call the careful, the middle, and the careless. Now if these transcriptions were merely records of observed fact, they would be immune from any criticism except that of phonetic experts. Prof. Jones's powers of observation and record are admitted. He has recorded, for the most part, his own pronunciation, and I do not suggest that it is inferior to mine. But the three styles are not merely records of fact; they are instruments of instruction, and therefore of propaganda; they are the styles *suited* for declamation, for deliberate conversation, for rapid conversation. Prof. Jones in his lucid introduction states the chief differences between them. The peculiarities of the careful style, as contrasted with the middle style, 'are especially marked. These differences are partly natural, i.e. modifications produced involuntarily as the result of speaking more slowly or of endeavouring to speak more distinctly, and partly artificial, i.e. modifications due to the well-established though perhaps somewhat arbitrary rules laid down by teachers of elocution, rules which are usually based on the spelling.' It is difficult to criticize this statement, because we are not told which types of 'modification' are natural and which are artificial, except that 'the tendency to replace weak vowels by strong vowels is natural', whereas the 'substitution' of *hw* for *w* in *which* is 'purely artificial'. But surely the account of what happens is inverted. The clearer articulation of the

careful style is not, surely, a *modification* of a less careful articulation; rather the more careless articulation is a modification, doubtless involuntary, of what we know to be the true and full sound. For how, 'endeavouring to speak more distinctly', should we know *what* 'modification' of ə we ought to produce? Prof. Jones, when using his careful style, says *cōmpāshən* (compassion); in the other style he says *cəmpāshən*; but how does he know—how, rather, should the plain man know—that ɔ̄ is the right vowel for this word, and not one of those others which rapid speech reduces to ə? I think Prof. Jones gives a truer picture of what happens when he remarks that 'it is never wrong to pronounce (certain sounds) as written, *and the weakening comes naturally when speaking at the ordinary rate*'.<sup>1</sup>

I give another example of what seems an inversion of the truth. Prof. Jones notes<sup>2</sup> that in the careful slow style we often say *care and discretion* without sounding the *r*, as we should in rapid speech; because, of course, there is a pause after *care*. This he describes as the 'omission of a connecting *r* where it would usually be inserted' in the middle style (*careanddiscretion*). Note *inserted*; the *r* of *care* is regarded as an insertion, and is therefore on exactly the same level as the *r* of *Indiaroffice*. Now for the student of phonetics the two phenomena *are* the same; the same unconscious motive which retains the *r* of *care* before a following vowel, inserts *r* to fill a hiatus between two vowels. But for us the difference is, none the less, the difference between right and wrong. We are not automata.

The middle style is clearly Mr. Jones's favourite. It is the style of his dictionary; and in his transcriptions it occupies 25 pages, against 9 and 11 given to the two extremes. It is the style which he recommends to foreigners. His success in teaching foreigners, by his method, to speak English 'like a native' has undoubtedly been great; and he must be allowed to know best how to secure results quickly. But to the outside observer it looks as if he had aggravated his pupils' labour by beginning at the wrong end. For if the pupil is first made familiar, by eye and ear and knowledge of the behaviour of his speech organs, with *hármany*, then when he comes to *harmónium* he has to learn not only a change of stress but also a new vowel for which he is wholly unprepared. If he had been taught *hármony* first, would not *hármany* have taught itself? In

<sup>1</sup> p. ix; my italics.

<sup>2</sup> p. vi.

Mr. Jones's words, 'the weakening comes naturally'. If a pupil had learned *only* the middle style, then when required by circumstances to speak more clearly and audibly he would have 'no resource but to emphasize with their full horrors words like *seprit*, *sinkerpate*, *dinersty*, &c. &c., which when spoken indistinctly in careless talk may pass muster, but when accurately articulated are not only vulgar and absurd, but often unrecognizable'.<sup>1</sup> My Gilbertian singer, if he had learned only the *patikyulə* of 'careful conversation', would have no choice but to 'put across'

Did nothing in per-tic-yu-ler.

There is evidence that Mr. Jones has found the results of his method sometimes embarrassing; he 'is right in complaining that his pupils make fools of themselves when they try to speak slower'.<sup>2</sup>

The danger is, of course, that if the phoneticians had their way the careful style might in the end be discarded as an 'artificial' and unnecessary complication of life, and *seprit* and *sinkerpate* cease to be vulgar and absurd by becoming standard and invariable. We should be told that, if we would but shed our prejudices, *seprit* and *sinkerpate* are as useful as *separate* and *syncopate*, and no less beautiful. But it could not be denied that identity of *partition* with *petition* would be inconvenient. That is why Bridges, with his unerring sense of the practical, laid so much stress on the nuisance of homophones.

I do not think this danger immediately grave. But it cannot safely be neglected; and its consideration requires some consideration of phonetic instruction and phonetic spelling. Bridges was convinced that the interests of our language, and the interests of our children, alike demand that elementary education include the teaching of the native language by means of phonetics. He was convinced, moreover, that the practical and commercial advantages of phonetic teaching must sooner or later be perceived; that, once perceived, they will be irresistible, and all spoken languages will be taught phonetically. This conviction is the key to his attitude. Believing that we are in real danger of having a degraded pronunciation 'sprung upon us in England and taught in all our schools', he applied his great polemical talents in the way we have seen.

<sup>1</sup> Bridges, *op. cit.*, p. 40, writing *er* for *ə*.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

Believing that phonetic spelling is inevitable,<sup>1</sup> he laboured to win us over to a system of his own devising, which he believed would combine substantial accuracy with practical convenience.

The advantages accruing to any student of language from a knowledge of phonetics cannot be questioned. But I confess myself not convinced that we ought all to have it. Here, if anywhere, a little knowledge is a danger; and if phonetic science were universally taught, I am afraid only a smattering of it would penetrate the mass. But it would be enough to undermine the belief, now almost universal, that speech is closer to spelling than in fact it is; and I suspect that this is a salutary delusion. Nor do I trust Prof. Jones's pupils to refrain from the pleasures of iconoclasm.

Bridges believed that the phonetic instruction of the young, in their own language, was necessary to save our pronunciation from irreparable decay. But he believed it necessary also for 'the rescuing of English children from the blighting fog through which their tender minds are now forced to struggle on the first threshold of life'. It is impossible to read the eloquent passage<sup>2</sup> in which he pleads this cause, without some misgiving. English spelling, though I cannot regard it as 'incomprehensible, indefensible nonsense', is certainly a stumbling-block to many; and in the education of the very young it may be an instrument of torture. But there is no need to make it so. My experience of children is narrow; but my impression is that if children are allowed, in their tenderest years, to spell pretty much as they please, spelling is no bugbear; and many children, I believe, take pleasure in the elasticity of English spelling; sometimes aiming at phonetic brevity, sometimes abounding in unnecessary letters. I have been told by schoolmasters that if the conventional spelling is not insisted on, children are not afraid to use in their compositions words which they cannot spell; and I think they are more amused than disgusted by spellings like *eight* and *ought*.<sup>3</sup> A favourite game of some children, when they have learned to read, is to talk in letters instead of in words; and they play this game with such fluency that it is difficult to follow them.

<sup>1</sup> Not, perhaps, for all purposes. See Tract II, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand I have found that the phonetic simplicity of Latin (in the modern pronunciation) does not make it as easy as one had hoped; and, in particular, that Latin words are often mis-spelled.

It may be doubted, then, whether strict phonetic instruction, with phonetic spelling as its necessary instrument, ought to be a part of elementary education. That is not to say that pronunciation should be left to chance. All children are, or should be, taught to read aloud; and experience shows that, in the course of such instruction, the children of educated parents<sup>1</sup> can without difficulty be taught to enunciate with fair accuracy. Much more could be done in this way; and if it were done, we need have no fear of making our children prigs or precisians, even if they should trust somewhat too much to spelling as a guide. Spelling is admittedly influential; why should it be frowned on as a pedantic mentor, when the influence of vulgar and illiterate talk, which everywhere assails our children's ears, is left to do its 'natural' worst? It cannot be said that excessive fidelity to spelling has done as much harm to pronunciation as neglect of it has done. I cannot share Prof. Jones's distrust of the 'somewhat arbitrary rules laid down by teachers of elocution'. If these are sometimes alien to the natural tendency of standard English, they usually have the support of other dialects; and uniformity, which the influence of one dialect on another may produce, is not in itself an evil. Such pronunciations as *often* with *t* sounded, or *extraordinary* with the first *a* sounded, may be rightly condemned as not in accordance with the best standard English usage; but they are not inherently vicious. Even the 'artificial' decay of place-names, as *Brōmpton* for *Brunton*, or *Cōndūit Street* for *Cundit Street*, is much less harmful than the 'natural' assimilation of *partition* to *petition*. Prof. Jones himself comes to my aid when he remarks<sup>2</sup> of his own transcription that 'in some cases it does not represent exactly what is pronounced but rather what is aimed at'. Why *not* aim at something more accurate, more traditional, more beautiful, and less homophonous than we actually pronounce in our slacker moments?

The truth of this matter has been set forth by Bridges in a passage of great beauty:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This may be thought to betray an undemocratic point of view. But I am not clear that it is yet possible to legislate effectively for the masses. The influence of wireless, if it continues to be as judiciously handled as it now is, should in time yield results.

<sup>2</sup> *Phonetic Transcriptions*, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

'When children have been educated to speak correctly, their variation from that full pronunciation is a natural carelessness, and has the grace of all natural behaviour, and it naturally obeys whatever laws have been correctly propounded by phoneticians; since it is itself the phenomena from which those laws are deduced. This carelessness or ease of speech will vary naturally *in all degrees* according to occasion, and being dependent on mood and temper will never go wrong. It is warm and alive with expression of character, and may pass quite unself-consciously from the grace of negligence to the grace of correctness, for it has correctness at command, having learned it, and its carelessness has not been doctored and bandaged.'

The questions of phonetic teaching, and of the use of phonetic spelling for general purposes, are not easily kept apart. The first does not necessarily imply the second. I do not know whether phoneticians are, in the main, favourable to phonetic spelling or not. As philologists I should expect them to dislike it; for of all instruments likely to arrest the natural process of phonetic change, an authorized (and therefore fixed) phonetic spelling is by far the most powerful; and we are told that a live organism must grow and change, or die. But if a phonetic spelling once became familiar to all teachers and all their pupils, its practical convenience would, I think, be irresistibly attractive. Almost all people assume—wrongly, as I believe—that the sole function of spelling is to represent speech. If a simple phonetic system were once widely known, the traditional spelling must be attacked as 'incomprehensible, indefensible nonsense'; and there would be no good popular argument for its retention.

My own dislike of phonetic spelling rests upon grounds which have not, I think, been much examined: in brief, upon grounds of etymology. Consider such a group of words as these following: *session, procession, precedent, president, precision, recess, rescission, scissors, cadence, accident, occasion*. These words contain the Latin roots of *sedeo, cedo, caedo, scindo, cado*. Many people, wholly ignorant of Latin, are yet able to spell these words, and to use them correctly. But a full appreciation of their mutual relations and of their literary associations—without which a word is not fully known—is hardly possible without etymological knowledge; and I suggest that such knowledge of these words as the unlearned do possess is far more hardly won than is the mere power to spell them.

But the traditional spelling, acquired without great difficulty and retained without any difficulty, is not only an inestimable aid to the acquisition of Latin, it is also, for those who have even a little Latin, the key to the history and the full meaning of the English words themselves. Even for those who have no Latin, the traditional spelling is a valuable aid to the acquisition of French or Italian, and to a knowledge of the mutual relations of these languages. If both English and French were spelled phonetically, the large element which is common to them would, for all practical purposes, be obliterated; it would be known only to a handful of scholars.<sup>1</sup>

If *conscience* were spelled *konshens* (or *konshans*), no schoolboy would ever learn, or if he learned would ever remember, that it had anything to do with

nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa.<sup>2</sup>

He would have great difficulty in remembering that *conscience* is the same word as *la conscience* and *la coscienza*.

Even within our own language, phonetic spelling would work havoc with relations which are of practical as well as historical significance. If *science*, *conscience*, and *prescience* became *syens*, *konshens*, and *preesiens* (or, as before, *-ans*), very few people would ever know that they are related. Many cognates would, under Prof. Jones's system, appear in different places in an alphabetical dictionary; *content* would be divorced from *content*. These objections apply with less force to a more conservative phonetic system, such as Bridges advocated. But any system must make obscure a great deal that is still plain. I believe that the preservation of the traditional clues has advantages, cultural and even practical, of immeasurably greater importance than the inconveniences which arise from the phonetic anomalies of our spelling. It is no exaggeration to say that phonetic spelling would cut us off from antiquity, would estrange us from our European neighbours, and would condemn most of us to needless ignorance of our native tongue. I question if there is any 'mere' tradition which has a more august title to veneration than the tradition of spelling.

<sup>1</sup> I have a friend who once made the acquaintance of an illiterate Italian who had lived for some years in Scotland. He had learned to speak English, but was unaware that the English and Italian vocabularies had any connexion with each other.

<sup>2</sup> Whether he said *konskeery* or *konsiry*, makes no odds.

The danger that a universal phonetic spelling might supersede the traditional spelling is doubtless remote. Yet such a change is a not impossible sequel to a political revolution in any country. In times of political upheaval the normal strength of tradition becomes its greatest weakness, and everything is in danger that can be called old. In such circumstances an ancient institution which, like our spelling, has been commonly abused and derided, and has had few whole-hearted defenders, would have little chance of success against any attack made in the name of convenience and reason.

But the arguments which can be marshalled against phonetic spelling are good also, though in a lesser degree, against lesser innovations. Every change in educational practice which shifts the emphasis from the written to the spoken language, which focuses popular attention on the fluctuations of speech, or ridicules spelling as obsolete and irrational, tends to ignore facts which are fundamental. In the first place, the spoken language is in perpetual flux. It varies in different countries, in different parts of the same country, in classes, in individuals. Any attempt to standardize a phase of it is an attempt at fixation which does not deserve to succeed. Secondly, if pronunciation varies too much, it also varies too little. The phonetic differences between *different* words are not great enough to secure the integrity of the language. Differences in spelling, which are traditional and not arbitrary, are needed to keep distinct words which are already in danger of confusion in speech, and would be in greater danger of confusion if the distinctions of spelling were lessened or removed. Spelling, which has come to represent much more than mere sound, is the most stable and the most significant element in our language.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Just after this was written I opened the *Atlantic Monthly* for May 1932, to find an article, *English as She will be Spoke*, by Prof. Ernest Weekley, which confirms my fears. 'The spelling of English words is traditional and accidental rather than rational and scientific. In the course of time some change in the direction of simplified spelling is inevitable. As a matter of fact, the ideal English phonetic alphabet already exists. . . . Its adoption in schools and eventual compulsory use by all printers are but a matter of time, but of a very long time.' These reforms will be 'forced by the few and eager on an inert or reluctant majority'. This forecast, and the assumption on which it rests, are the more impressive because Prof. Weekley is a philologist of imagination, who dislikes uniformity, and thinks even chaos preferable to standardization.



## V

The mazes of this perplexing subject have led me far from 'Oxford English', of which I set out to attempt a description. But if all the problems on which I have touched were solved, we should still be a long way short of a complete account of standard English, or of any English. For the study of pronunciation has been almost confined to one of the two sides of the subject, and that perhaps not the more important.<sup>1</sup>

'Phonetics is the science of speech-sounds. But sounds may be considered from two opposite points of view, the *organic* and the *acoustic*. From the organic point of view a sound is the result of certain positions and actions of the organs of speech, as when we define *f* as a lip-teeth consonant. This is the point of view of the speaker. . . . To the hearer, on the other hand, *f* is not primarily a lip-teeth consonant, but a hiss consonant similar to that denoted by *ɸ* (*h*), although this latter is formed by quite a different articulation; this is the acoustic point of view.'<sup>2</sup>

'It is indispensable', Sweet continues, 'for the student to cultivate both the organic and the acoustic sense'; and the expert phonetician has an ear so trained that he can tell just how a sound is made when he hears it. But he can hardly describe this sound except in 'organic' terms; and the literature of phonetics in fact takes little account of any thing that cannot be so described and analysed. Sweet remarks elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that 'natural differences between voices' do not 'directly concern the phonetician: to him a given vowel remains the same whether it is uttered by a man or a woman, whether it is produced with good or bad tone'.

There is, indeed, in ordinary use a vocabulary which describes the acoustic properties of speech. We speak of a twang and a drawl; we use terms which assign praise or blame, such as 'musical' and 'harsh', 'soft' and 'metallic'.<sup>4</sup> But these terms are not scientific; pronouncing

<sup>1</sup> 'Pronunciation itself is perhaps not so important a feature of good speech as the modulation of the voice, the articulation of individual sounds, and the intonation of sounds in combination.' Larsen and Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sweet, *Sounds of English*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Messrs. Larsen and Walker permit themselves the use of such terms as *crisp*, *affected*, *mincing*.

dictionaries, of course, have no means of dealing with them. Even such a writer as Bridges, whose interest was almost purely aesthetic, touches only occasionally and allusively<sup>1</sup> on these aspects of speech. They are, perhaps, by their nature incapable of scientific analysis, and belong to the realm of taste. Botany does not attempt to tell us why a violet is more beautiful than a thistle. Yet the difference is important, and we recognize it in our walks abroad and in planning our gardens. The aesthetic of language is, like the aesthetic of music or painting, highly subjective and eternally debatable; yet musical and artistic criticism continues to employ critics and to interest their audience. Linguistic criticism on the same plane hardly exists.

Now the qualities with which such criticism would concern itself are not congenital<sup>2</sup> or unalterable. They differ, as is well known, in regions and in social classes. They cannot, perhaps, be usefully described in text-books, or taught in schools. But they can be, and are, learned by unconscious imitation. And they are more important, in many respects, than what phoneticians record.

These differences are, I suppose, largely a matter of intonation. Intonation is not recorded in phonetic script. Mr. Jones in his *Phonetic Transcriptions* gives one specimen—a piece of Shakespeare by Sir Herbert Tree, preserved by the gramophone. He shows it by curves 'recorded on an ordinary bass clef' with a phonetic transcript subjoined. But this is a mere record; Mr. Jones makes no general comment. If he had done so I could not follow him, being as I have said ignorant of the matter. I note, however, that it seems to be generally agreed that American English, which strikes us as 'flat', is on a flatter musical curve than our own. On the other hand, much American strikes my ear not only as monotonous, but also as over-emphatic; which may be due to an exaggerated use of stress (loudness). Whatever the cause, I have often found, in listening to American, that its variations soon lost their effect, so that I could not tell whether the speaker was being vivacious

<sup>1</sup> As in the passage quoted above, p. 554.

<sup>2</sup> The actual quality of the voice is, I suppose, mainly due to heredity, not to environment. The strong 'family likeness' in the voices of related persons seems to show this. But the beauty of any voice may be obscured by bad speaking. Note the difference between the singing of a choir and the speech of its members.

or not. I venture these speculations only because more competent judges are silent.

In any attempt I may make to characterize American speech, I am in danger of showing my ignorance. Most Englishmen expose themselves on this topic, from sheer lack of experience. American is widely differentiated, and we fail to make important distinctions. So, for that matter, does Dr. Vizetelly, who seems confident that any American is better than any British. British English, he tells us, is 'steadily becoming inarticulate. Go into any church and listen to the clergyman reading the service or preaching. Few can hear what the man is saying; fewer still can understand him. How very different it is over here! . . . We have a standard of speech for New York which, in my humble judgment, is superior to the stilted standard of speech in Pall Mall.' If there is a 'standard of speech for New York' I do not know it. But I do know that an American exists which is comparable to the best standard English. It is recognizably American, and little if at all affected by exposure to the influences of London; yet it is free from what we call the 'twang' and monotony of most American, and it is very pleasing. But I imagine that it is less common, and much less influential, than standard English; and the transient Englishman hardly knows where to find it. He cannot be sure of finding it in the first-class saloon of an Atlantic liner (as he would confidently look to find standard English on a P. and O.), or on the Capitol, or even in the campus of Harvard. Generally speaking, I believe, it is a small and elusive minority.

The friends of standard English may take comfort from the knowledge that American also has its domestic critics. I refrain from citing the account<sup>1</sup> of it which Henry James gave to a college audience in 1905, because James may be thought a vitiated witness. But there is high native authority for the view that American has its own diseases. Messrs. Larsen and Walker, very properly from their standpoint, refuse to make any aesthetic judgements; but I note that they dwell at some length on the evils of 'drawling' ('undue protraction of individual sounds', with consequent 'leveling out of the stresses' and 'absence of tone') and of

<sup>1</sup> Fully described by Prof. Louise Pound in the *American School Review* for June 1905.

'nasality, or nasal twang' ('there are no nasalized vowels in English').<sup>1</sup> Prof. Kurath is more explicit.<sup>2</sup>

'The Westerner can be recognized by his even drone even at a distance. . . . A hard strained quality of the voice and a nasal twang are common in the country and the smaller towns. The larger cities . . . have rid themselves of these rural characteristics among the upper level. Their speech is becoming more varied in the inflection of the voice, and the voice less strained, doubtless as a result of city life with its opportunities for conversation.'

I cannot claim familiarity with the American of the Middle West. But I confess to a doubt whether the opportunities of city life have wholly eradicated from American in general the fault which Prof. Kurath here describes. I seem to detect, in the speech of many cultivated Americans, the vestiges at least of that harsh flatness which grates on my ear as I go about New York. I am perhaps on more dangerous ground when I suggest that the American *r*, when it occurs in the combinations from which standard English has expelled it, is always definitely ugly. At its worst it deserves James's description—'a sort of morose grinding of the back teeth'. When a polite stranger, as so often happens, says in passing, 'Pardon me', the grating of the *r* ruins his gracious intention; I hear only a snarl. Of course this is not good American; but even good American is not free from this cacophony.<sup>3</sup> The loss of *r* in standard English has had embarrassing consequences; but on balance I think we are the gainers.

It was once my fortune to hear two American professors of English, of the highest eminence, sigh for an endowment which might enable them to propagate standard English by radio and gramophone. I suppress their names, and do not share their aspiration. I doubt if propaganda in favour of standard English would be very effective, however handsomely endowed; and I am so undemocratic as to believe that the best, in speech as in other things, can never be widely and rapidly disseminated without damage to itself. Something can and should be done. But the fine flower of standard English is the product of qualities and opportunities which cannot be broadcast. It is the

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *S.P.E.* XXX, p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> 'There are sounds of a mysterious intrinsic meanness.' Henry James, discussing *r*.

speech not of a region, but of a class within that region: of a class which, though not arrogantly exclusive, is necessarily limited in numbers. Its traditions are maintained not, primarily, by the universities, but by the public schools, which were once aristocratic<sup>1</sup> and are not yet so plutocratic that they cannot assimilate alien strains. It is sometimes said that the public schools constrain our youth to one uniform pattern. I have found no such uniformity in their speech. It has agreeable qualities in common, but it remains sufficiently individual to express character and mood, so far as it is seemly that these should find everyday expression.

The merits of this speech may perhaps be found in clear articulation—often careless and sketchy, but unobstructed by any phonetic mannerism, and passing naturally 'from the grace of negligence to the grace of correctness'; in restrained yet energetic modulation; and in purity of tone. If standard English has these qualities, it has merits which are clearly exceptional, and which far outweigh the inaccuracies which its critics condemn.

Bridges, in a footnote<sup>2</sup> to his tract, declared that he 'still spoke the bad Southern English that he learned as a child and at school'. We may concede, reluctantly, that from his special point of view this confession was honest and justified. But if every aspect of speech is considered, few that ever heard him will hesitate to affirm that Robert Bridges's bad Southern English was superior, in harmony, in strength, in subtlety, to most brands of English. The best speech is, like the best of everything, very rare. It is the speech not of any class, but of those few individuals in whom a rare combination of quality and opportunity has made speech a work of art: in some degree, of conscious art. We recognize, in great actors or great orators, beauty of voice; but it was not mere beauty of voice that gave its unforgettable quality to the utterance of Lord Rosebery or Lord Balfour; it was also, and mainly, their singular mastery of the instrument of speech.

To speak like an angel is a rare gift. On a lower plane, beauty of speech is happily not rare. Of such common speech, the best is that of young people. It is not the most accurate, but it is the most pleasing: partly because age induces gruffness and other vocal infirmities; partly because age, like illness, affects our speech with lassitude, and care creeps into our enunciation. The speech of the

<sup>1</sup> In a very qualified sense, of course.

<sup>2</sup> P. 32.

very old, if it is serene and sweet, is remarked as rare and beautiful. The young, if they are happy in their opportunities, are commonly sure of themselves, and free from preoccupation; their speech therefore, if it has not been vitiated in childhood by false and irrelevant tricks, runs true and clear. The merit of the best speech of English youth, if I am not mistaken, lies in no superadded airs and graces, but in its natural simplicity. It early betrays, I concede, a measure of social self-confidence, perhaps even a certain innocent arrogance; and that, I suspect, is why it is offensive to many who speak in different accents. But self-reliance, so it be modest and not aggressive, is no impediment to beauty of carriage, or of speech.

I write with the more confidence in praise of our best English speech, because I was not in early youth very familiar with it. My own English is of mixed origins, and I have studied standard English with something of an outsider's interest and vigilance. I have no doubt that it is in essentials the best of English dialects, and therefore—though foreign languages may excel it in this or in that quality—one of the most subtle and most beautiful of all expressions of the human spirit.

Whether standard English will long be able to maintain its position and its integrity seems open to doubt. It is exposed, as we have seen, to dangers from within; but I have some confidence that it will survive those dangers. As the speech of a very small minority of English speakers it is obviously exposed to gradual absorption by the surrounding mass, and perhaps also to deliberate attack. It is well known that English vocabulary and idiom are undergoing penetration from America and elsewhere. We freely, and no doubt wisely, admit words which not many years ago would have been resisted as undesirable aliens. Even our grammar is threatened. The traditional use of *shall* and *will* is not much understood or practised outside the limits of standard English, and is certainly in danger: not only in danger of being swamped, but in danger of direct assault. A learned philologist has told me that he thinks it doomed, because Americans and others do not intend to be troubled with a cumbrous and unnecessary distinction, and what they have no wish to use or understand they will in time remove from the text-books. The characteristics of standard English pronunciation may be attacked from similar motives.

The strength of standard English lies in its prestige, which is still very great, and—as I hope and believe—in its intrinsic virtue. The best issue we can look for is, perhaps, such a gradual approximation of the best English and the best in America and elsewhere, as would set up a new international standard. In any event, I think that standard English deserves to play a large if not a dominating part in forming the English of the future. But it will not receive its deserts if the voices of those who know and love it best are raised only in criticism of its faults. I hope that they will not forget, or forget to assert, its positive merits, which are certainly very great and are perhaps unique.

R. W. CHAPMAN.

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